

Spilled food a hazard at the wheel

By James R. Healey

That innocent candy bar could be as dangerous as a high-speed blowout.

Chocolate smears everything a driver touches. The instinctive reaction is to clean it off immediately, stealing attention from the road. Then — bang — a food-related wreck.

That's why chocolate is on a list of the ten most dangerous foods to consume while driving, according to an American insurance company.

Hagerty Classic Insurance, a classic car insurer based in Michigan, became interested in food-related wrecks last year after a damage claim.

"When we looked into it, we found that the guy's license was restricted to having no food within reach while driving," company President McKeel Hagerty says. The man had a number of food wrecks. That, plus claims for food damage to interiors of collectible cars, prompted Hagerty to "dig deeper. ... We were amazed."

It's more the spilling than the eating. Hagerty's claims showed that most food accidents happen in the morning. Drivers en route to work are worried about wearing food-stained clothes all day, so they urgently try to clean spills but crash instead, Hagerty surmises.

From worst to not-so-bad, the most dangerous foods to eat while driving



Coffee

2. Hot soup



3. Tacos

4. Chili-covered food



Juicy hamburgers

Hot coffee is infamously dangerous. It is the worst offender on the company's list — especially without a lid.

Hagerty says the data came from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety and company claims files. Researchers tried to judge how hard it is to consume each food with one hand while driving, and to gauge how urgently a driver would react to a spill.

"We know that eating is a big problem," but be careful about branding it the new villain, warns Michael Goodman, chief of driver behaviour research at NHTSA. "It's a lot easier for an investigating officer to identify food as a cause because the evidence is everywhere." In the case of cell-phones and other distractions, experts say there is often no evidence.

Fast-food merchants are on the case. More drive-through foods are packaged to fit cup holders. And products have been changed to improve what Taco Bell spokeswoman Laurie Gannon calls "portability." Her chain has adopted "thicker shredded cheese, crunchier taco shells, improved packaging." CPM

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6. Barbeque



7. Fried chicken



8. Jelly- & cream-filled doughnuts

9. Soft drinks

10. Chocolate

